

# THE EUGENICS REVIEW.

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## THE EUGENICS POLICY OF THE SOCIETY.

*At the Annual Meeting of the Society, which was held by kind permission at the rooms of the Royal Society on June 9th, Major Darwin, the President, spoke as follows:—*

For a long time the need has been felt for some more definite pronouncement of the aims of our Society, and during the last few months this question has occupied the close attention of your Council.

Personally I had always felt that any move in this direction was not without its dangers; for I feared it might reveal some serious differences within our ranks and therefore do more harm than good. In presenting to you the results of our labours, though I am glad to say that my dismal forebodings have been falsified, yet I do wish to call your attention to the opening words of this document, namely, those shown between brackets. If I may put the same thought in more familiar language it is that every member of our Society is not expected to toe the line with regard to every item of this statement of our policy. In a new and progressive movement, I believe that great and lasting harm would result from the promulgation of a programme beyond which there was to be no advance and from which there could be no retreat. In social matters the choice before us often lies between advancing in a somewhat tentative manner and not advancing at all; and, when faced with such a choice, we should remember that the world will progress most rapidly if we decline to be checked by every doubt which may arise in our minds, whilst remaining ready to own that we have taken a false step. Those of you who, like myself, are prepared to agree with every item in this statement of policy ought not, therefore, to be surprised or even to regret to learn that a few of our most honoured members are inclined to think we have gone too far in certain directions, whilst others have no doubt that we have not gone far enough. What we have tried to do is to state in general terms and in broad outline the lines of advance which meet with the approval of the great majority of the Council.

As you read through this programme several questions are likely to present themselves to you for consideration. In certain respects you may perhaps feel that we have gone into too great detail. On that point I will only say that in any popular exposition of our policy

it might be wise to cut out several items, whilst expressing the others in more homely language. With regard to certain reforms, you will probably enquire whether what is proposed does really come within the region of practical politics. On this subject I may perhaps call your attention to the concluding words of the second paragraph, where it is stated that to promote a change in public opinion must often be a preliminary step before attempting actually to introduce the reform in question.

Grave harm has often been done in the past by the endeavour to force on a reform for which the country was not prepared; and for a long time to come our efforts in certain directions will probably have to be of an educational character.

Then again you may be inclined to ask what are the exact methods by means of which it is proposed that some of the reforms suggested should be effected, reforms here only indicated in outline. It would of course be quite useless to propose for adoption any measure which could not possibly be carried out even in the future; but this we believe we have not done. All the proposals here made have been studied sufficiently to make me feel sure that they are not only justifiable but they are or will in time become practicable, that is if our future is to be one of racial advancement. There are, however, often many ways of reaching a desired end, and it is probably wise in the earlier stages of a controversy to endeavour to concentrate the attention of the public on the ends rather than on the exact means. When once the object sought to be attained is acknowledged to be right and desirable, then and not till then will it always be possible to discuss the means of attaining it in a sane and temperate way.

The necessity of getting the public to understand and appreciate our aims before we attempt to make known the exact methods by means of which we believe they can be attained may be illustrated by reference to the paragraph headed, "Family Limitation of the Less Fit," this being probably the item in our programme which raises the most difficult issues.

In passing I should like to emphasise the statement here made that, abortion being ruled out, the choice of the method of limitation should rest entirely with the individuals concerned. Contraceptive methods, as compared with other unobjectionable methods of family limitation, should be pressed on no one. The proposal to which I wish to call especial attention is, however, that when the amount of public assistance given to a couple indicates the probability that further parenthood would be immediately injurious to the nation and ultimately injurious to the race, the State should be regarded as having the right to exercise a limited amount of pressure in order to promote family limitation. Such pressure might be exercised in many ways, but until the right of the State to exercise it is admitted, it is possible that the discussion of these methods might only serve to confuse the issue. Now it has been urged that if eugenics is founded on false assumptions, by applying any such pressure the State might be inflicting a grave injustice on millions of persons; and here, as in some other instances, it may be wise in arguing this part of our case to assume that our

opponents are right in holding that natural inheritance is such an uncertain factor that it should be altogether neglected when discussing social problems. Making this entirely erroneous assumption, as it seems to us, we can still ask our opponents whether they consider that a married couple, who have already thrown a considerable burden for the maintenance of their family on the State, or in other words on their neighbours, really have the abstract right to increase that burden to an indefinite extent by the production of more children. In considering this question may I remind our opponents that, if they are right in holding that natural inheritance counts for nearly nothing in social matters, it follows that the differences between any two families must depend almost entirely on the effect of their early surroundings, including all that may be described under the title of home traditions. Now the home traditions acquired in a family long in the receipt of much public assistance must as a general rule be inferior to those acquired by social contact in the home, for example, of a highly skilled mechanic fully determined to be beholden to no man for the maintenance of his family. Our opponents, if relying entirely on environmental influences, cannot deny that families issuing from homes in any degree parasitic must on the average exhibit in consequence some inferiority in that quality which we English admire so much, namely, in the spirit of determined self help. Can there be an abstract right to damage the nation of the future by increasing the number of those in its ranks who exhibit any such average inferiority? Let it be remembered also that the greater the faith placed in the effects of environment, the more freely must it be admitted that any acquired inferiority will be passed on to others by social contact all through life. The members of a family subject to inferior home influences become centres from which by social contagion some injurious effects will continually emanate, whilst the opposite effect is produced with equal certainty by persons brought up in an atmosphere of higher ideals. Again let it be remembered that the burden of taxation thrown on the public by the appearance of more dependent children will have at all events some immediate effect in lessening the output of children from better homes.

The whole tone of the nation must be lowered both by a diminution in the production of children from independent homes and by an increase in the issue from dependent homes; and, even if some material inconvenience or restraint is necessary to prevent national social deterioration of this kind, can such a proceeding be described as unjust? Our proposals in this respect are, we believe, fully justifiable even if natural inheritance is a figment of our imagination; whilst if eugenics is based on solid grounds it is my firm conviction that it will only be by proceeding on the lines here broadly laid down that the nation can be saved from racial deterioration.

No doubt this Society has often to discuss topics which make us liable to be misrepresented; but this, I hold, should not prevent us from boldly facing the truth. I have just been reading an interesting book on Social Development, recently published by Prof. Hobhouse, in which he criticises the position which he believes to be generally

adopted by Eugenists. He writes that he does "not accept relative poverty as a criterion of unfitness," (p. 121) apparently in order to point to what he regards as a common error of Eugenists. My difficulty in dealing with this observation is to ascertain what is the exact scientific meaning intended to be conveyed by the word "criterion," and all I can do is to state my own views in my own words. Wages and earnings—I do not say wealth or poverty—are, I hold, in some degree correlated with valuable inborn qualities, or will become so correlated in the future; a belief rendered probable by *a priori* arguments and refuted by no facts known to me. But I would, however, rather quote Prof. Hobhouse's opinions when I believe them to be in accord with our own views. In one passage his words imply that "if the most justly organised Society" is to result in the useful citizen being "more likely than the unsocial and useless to perpetuate his stock," certain conditions must be fulfilled; one of these conditions being that Society should make "it difficult to live except by social service." (p. 122) Taken quite literally the words "make it difficult to live" seem to point to measures far more drastic than any which we have dared to propose. Parenthood implies life, and if I may substitute a more mildly worded condition covering much the same ground, namely that Society should give no encouragement or sanction to the production of a family except by those who are rendering valuable social service to the State, it appears to me that this is the exact condition which we in our programme are endeavouring to enforce. If Prof. Hobhouse, or anyone else, will discuss the best way of ensuring the fulfilment of this condition, such discussions will be most helpful to us in our future deliberations.

The last paragraph of our programme is intended to make it clear that as individuals we are most anxious to play our part in promoting all such social reform as we hold to be calculated to benefit the present generation; for in this respect we have often been misrepresented. Here again I notice that Prof. Hobhouse writes that "it is a fallacy to infer that social progress or deterioration is reducible to racial progress or deterioration" (pp. 112, 113), apparently implying that this is a common Eugenic fallacy. Perhaps it has been so in the past, but I have now been for fifteen years the President of the only Eugenic Society in this country (a state of things, by the bye, which should no longer be tolerated) and I am sure that no words of mine uttered during this period can be fairly so interpreted. To be Eugenists does not prevent us from being human beings and as human beings we are not blind to the social needs of our times or unready to play our part in social development. I fear I may have appeared to be very pessimistic in some of my remarks to-day, for I certainly do hold that to march along the downward path of racial decline as I fear our nation is doing at present, is very slowly but very surely to march towards grave disasters of unknown kinds. Of the truth of this forecast I am quite certain; but I will conclude by saying that, granted proper social progress in this respect, I am equally certain that this disaster can be avoided by the introduction of reforms somewhat on the lines suggested in broad outline in our programme.